

To the Fellowship Affirmation of Faith team
{sent to those whose emails I have available}

I am writing to strongly urge you to reconsider a subtle but significant change that our proposed Affirmation of Faith is making under the article on “Future Things,” using the language of “unregenerate,” in place of “wicked” in referring to the objects of God’s eternal wrath and punishment in hell. I am concerned, as a convictional Calvinist, that we will be enshrining language that leans towards hyper-Calvinism and is virtually without historical precedent. Moreover, the scriptural proof given for the change is highly debatable (Rev 20:15). The balance of Scripture teaches that those in hell will be there for their unrepentant sin, whereas God’s choice to not regenerate them is rarely, if ever, emphasized. To be clear, I do not believe the current statement to be entirely wrong, but to be a wrongful emphasis that creates problems in our apologetic to the world and in our pastoral practice. I am aware that the team has already considered this word and section to some degree already and I thank you for the very significant work you have already invested in this statement. I hope, however, that you may take the time to read through this submission and seriously consider why a strong Calvinist is warning about possibly hyper-Calvinistic language.¹

Scriptural Evidence

On balance, the Scriptural emphasis on why some men will inhabit hell for eternity, rather than heaven, is on account of their active, actual sins against God. Those who are angry or insult their brothers (Mat 5:21–22), or who sin sexually in their hearts (Mat 5:29–30) will be sent to hell. “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Mt 7:19). It is “workers of lawlessness” who will be cast out (Mt 7:21–23). Those who cause sin, are law-breakers, and are evil, will be thrown into the fiery furnace (Mt 13:40–50).

Stepping outside the gospels and Christ’s own teaching, Peter teaches that both men and angels will be cast into hell for their sins and unrighteousness (2 Pet 2:4, 9–10)—hell will be for the “destruction of the ungodly” (2 Pet 3:7). Paul states that pagans are without excuse even though they may not have heard the gospel because they know, by the law written on their hearts, that they deserve to die (Rom 1:32, 2:15). He also affirms that those who are marked by unrepentant sin will not inherit the kingdom (Eph 5:5).

Two verses could possibly be used to show another strand of thought in contrast to this emphasis. 2 Thessalonians 1:8 states that the Lord Jesus will inflict “vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.” However, not knowing God is not a passive idea in Scripture, but an active and rebellious action in which there is the suppression of what is truly known, out of a desire for sin and evil (Rom 1:18, Jn 3:18–21). The other passage, and the one mentioned in the explanation notes in the Affirmation of Faith, is Revelation 20:15, the larger section of which reads

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is

¹ For what it is worth, I have written a full-length doctrinal treatment on the doctrine of hell, *Is There Anything Good About Hell?* that has been strongly endorsed by the most published theologian on the topic, Robert Peterson, and which has been favourably reviewed by *Themelios* and *The Master’s Seminary Journal* (forthcoming). For more information, <http://anythinggoodabouthell.com/>

the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Re 20:12–15)

There is considerable debate as to the relationship between the books mentioned in the first part of verse 20, and the book of life which was opened afterward. In parallel to the wide testimony of Scripture of a judgment of works, this passage first says that that all men were judged “by what they had done.” It is only after this judgment is undertaken that those whose names were not in the book of life were thrown into hell. There are many passages which refer to the idea of enrollment in a book as demonstrating or symbolic of a true covenant relationship with the Lord. Among these, several should be interpreted as visible and current recognition of being among the people of God (Exo 32:32, Ps 69:27–28, Dan 12:1–2). Some passages clearly refer to this enrollment as a work of God, clearly preceding any human action or works (Rev 13:8, 17:8). It is not clear whether any of them, however, refer to regeneration, although regeneration is, of course, assumed as background for the former group and as subsequent for the latter group.

While it is *possible* that the point of Rev 20:15 is that those whom God didn't elect within the eternal covenant of redemption are thrown into hell, two interpretations seem much more likely. Either, firstly, that having established righteousness or unrighteousness on the basis of one's deeds (albeit from faith), this is proven as enrollment among the people of God within the book of life. A reading in line with Ps 69:27–28 and Dan 12:1–2 would support this view. Or, secondly, that having judged all works, because even among the regenerate their works are imperfect, the subsequent consideration of the book of life would demonstrate which of these are appointed to life eternally. A reading in line with Rev 13:8, 17:8 would support this view. A biblical-theological emphasis may prefer the first reading, while a systematic-theological emphasis may prefer the second reading.

Either way, the currently proposed revision answers the question, “why are people sent to hell?”, not by answering that they are wicked, or unrepentant sinners, as the balance of Scripture does, but by answering that God has not done what would lead to their salvation (regenerate them). To illustrate the problem in another way, consider the statement that God will send those to hell who have not heard of Christ. Like the proposed AoF statement, it is technically true. But it places the emphasis in entirely the wrong place. Not hearing of the way of salvation is tangential to the main point which is that they are culpable sinners. We should be equally uncomfortable with the language of “unregenerate” in the proposed AoF.

Historical Creeds and Confessions

It ought to also bear some weight with us that no significant Reformed or Baptist confession of which I am aware teaches that the objects of God's eternal wrath are those who are unregenerate. The table below summarizes the teaching of each confession on the question of the judgment and eternity.²

Confession	Language used
Augsburg (1530)	Ungodly men
Free-Will Baptist, Baptist (1534)	Wicked
Scotch Confession (1560)	Reprobate and unfaithful
Belgic (1561)	Wicked and ungodly
Heidelberg (1563)	Unbelievers and hypocrites
Second Helvetic (1566)	Due to corruption and sins
Irish Articles of Religion (1615)	Wicked
Canons of Dordt (1619)	Due to sin

² Many of these documents were found in Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. 3., and Nettles, *Teaching Truth, Training Hearts: The Study of Catechisms in Baptist Life*. Some are publicly available online.

Westminster Confession (1647)	“The reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient” and “the wicked, who know not God, and obey not the gospel of Jesus Christ”
Savoy Declaration (1658)	“The reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient” and “the wicked, who know not God, and obey not the gospel of Jesus Christ”
Second London Baptist (1689)	“The reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient” and “the wicked, who know not God, and obey not the gospel of Jesus Christ”
Keach’s Catechism, Baptist (1693)	Due to sin
First Principles of the Oracles of God, Baptist (1783)	Wicked
New Hampshire, Baptist (1833)	Wicked
Boyce’s Brief Catechism of Bible Doctrine, Baptist (1874)	Wicked
Broadus’ Catechism of Bible Teaching, Baptist (1892)	Wicked

Although we are “always reforming,” it should cause us significant pause when using historically novel language. I suspect that most of those who wrote these documents would have considered the proposed language as bordering on hyper-Calvinistic, at least without adding language about wickedness.

Implications of the Proposed Language

As I have mentioned, I *do* believe that the unregenerate will be in hell. My concern is that this point is rarely emphasized, either in Scripture or in the literature on the doctrine of hell, and for important reasons. I will mention two.

Apologetically, it creates a problem of witness to the world. Unbelievers regularly impugn the God of the Bible for sending people to an eternity of conscious torment. “How can a loving God do this?”, they challenge. What answer do we want to put into the mouths of our pastors and people? The answer we ought to give is that man has sinned so grievously against God that hell is the just punishment and then proceed to persuade them personally of this fact that they may be saved.

Pastorally, it also undermines preaching on the topic of hell, which is almost always oriented in Scripture towards warning those in the visible church against ongoing sin (Mat 10:28, Heb 10:26–30) or towards assuring the saints that the persecution they endure at the hands of the wicked will be recompensed (2 Thess 1:7–9, Rev 14:9–12). I am not sure what it would look like to preach on the unregenerate being sent to hell.

My hope is that even at this late stage, the Affirmation of Faith team will take a closer look at this novel language and consider changing it back to the “wicked,” which is consistent with the balance of Scripture and is the almost universal testimony of the creeds and confessions of our forebears. If I can be of any more help, I would be happy to discuss these matters further. Thank you for your service to the saints and our churches.



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